

Expanding branding: effects of multiple brand types on organizational attractiveness

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to examine the relative effects of three organizational brand types (product, employment and corporate social responsibility brands) on organizational attractiveness. The potential differences in the impacts exerted by each brand on organizational attractiveness between the US and Chinese job seekers are also examined.

Design/methodology/approach – A policy-capturing design was used among both US and Chinese participants to test the hypothesized relationships using multilevel modeling.

Findings – Results suggest that each brand type independently contributes to the prediction of attractiveness, with the employment brand a significantly stronger predictor than the other two. Besides, the strength of relationships between brands and organizational attractiveness varies among job seekers from different national contexts.

Originality/value – The findings contribute to the limited understanding of how different types of brands together influence organizational attractiveness among job seekers, and the role national context plays in it.

Keywords Product brand, Employment brand, Corporate social responsibility brand, Organizational attractiveness

Paper type Research paper

Despite the rise of global giants in the Chinese sportswear market, the Chinese brand Erke has been an unpopular choice among customers for many years. Its products have long faded from the public's sight and Erke has suffered sinking profits. Things suddenly turned, however, following an announcement on the company's official Weibo account (a Chinese microblogging platform similar to Twitter) on July 22, 2021, regarding its RMB 50m (US \$7.7m) donation to victims of massive floods in the Henan province (Chen, 2021). Without paid promotion on social media, this post went viral among Chinese netizens, who had otherwise held the impression that Erke was on the verge of bankruptcy. Shortly, the positive attention translated into an exponential sales increase. Customers emptied out Erke's warehouses and the inner computer system broke down amid the rush of orders.



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Data availability statement: The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Several years prior, Target Corporation experienced a severe and well-publicized security breach involving credit card transactions. This breach had staggering ramifications for its profitability and brand image in the minds of consumers (Germano *et al.*, 2013). During the following summer, in an apparent attempt to brighten its tarnished image, Target strove to highlight its ongoing efforts at corporate social responsibility (CSR) by engaging in a back-to-school campaign called “Buy One Give One” in which it furnished school supplies to needy children with every Target-branded “Up and Up” school supply purchase (Krasselt, 2014). Before the data breach incident and for many consecutive years, Target Corporation was named a “Best Place to Work,” or otherwise garnered similar accolades highlighting its superlative employment practices.

The Erke and Target cases are particularly interesting and salient examples of the confluence of multiple *brand images*, or a set of meanings by which an individual describes, remembers and relates to a company (Kennedy, 1977). It is typical for companies to simultaneously hold and portray these images to its stakeholders; including investors, consumers and potential employees (Lievens and Slaughter, 2016). Importantly, those stakeholders likely attach differing levels of importance to different brand types, related to their specific goals (Highhouse *et al.*, 2009). However, the recruitment literature tends to focus on one brand type at a time (Greening and Turban, 2000; Jones *et al.*, 2014; Lievens, 2007).

Although some work has attempted to incorporate sub-elements of other brand types into an overall brand assessment (e.g. De Stefano *et al.*, 2018; Diab and Highhouse, 2015), extant research informs only scarcely about which brand is most important. This is especially true for the recruitment literature, which sheds limited light on the relative impact of each brand on organizational attractiveness to job seekers, and whether brand types function interactively (Lievens and Slaughter, 2016). As a result, we cannot predict if the brand strategies adopted by Erke or Target would be effective for recruitment purposes. Because of the vital role talent recruitment holds in organizational success (Cable and Yu, 2014), research attention is merited to clarify the independent effect of each brand type and to study the relative weight each brand has in job seekers’ decision-making.

Another gap in the recruitment literature concerns how brands impact job seekers’ reactions in a cross-national context (Baum and Kabst, 2013; Lievens and Slaughter, 2016). As more organizations operate multinationally and a more diverse and global applicant pool becomes increasingly important in the “war for talent” (Allen and Vardaman, 2017), organizations must develop and execute brand strategies in multiple countries. National cultural and economic differences act as roadblocks in attracting international talents (Baum and Kabst, 2013; Ma and Allen, 2009), yet research in recruitment and branding has been confined to Western countries, casting doubts on generalizability in other contexts (Allen and Vardaman, 2017; Lievens and Slaughter, 2016). Studies on the effects of national context on recruitment are still scant and unable to advise on whether companies should directly apply branding practices in other countries or customize them (Han and Ling, 2016).

Against this backdrop, this study draws upon signaling theory and person-environment fit theory, and empirically examines and compares the unique effects of multiple brand types on organizational attractiveness to job seekers. We start by explicitly considering product, employment and CSR brand types separately and proposing that each has independent effects on organizational attractiveness. Our approach is in keeping with recent trends in the Human Resources field to address multiple stakeholder concerns rather than focusing on singular areas of excellence (Maurer, 2014; Ulrich *et al.*, 2012). We further explore the relative importance of each brand type in shaping organizational attractiveness. By doing so, we hope to answer the question whether there is a dominant brand effect on

recruitment outcomes, thus providing a better understanding of which aspects job seekers value most during the pre-hire stage.

In addition, adopting a cross-national perspective, we seek to enrich our knowledge of whether national context moderates the impact of brand images on organizational attractiveness. Specifically, we collect data from China and the USA – two countries with considerable differences among various cultural and economic dimensions (Han and Ling, 2016; Ralston *et al.*, 2008). We specifically examine whether Chinese and US job seekers weigh product, employment and CSR brands differently in evaluating the attractiveness of hiring organizations. Our study thus answers calls for research on recruiting across cultures (Allen and Vardaman, 2017; Ployhart and Weekley, 2014) and complements recruitment literature by empirically comparing organizational brands in two different national contexts.

Theory and hypotheses development

Product, employment and CSR brands, and organizational attractiveness

Attracting a steady flow of capable human resources is critical to firm sustenance and competitive advantage (Barber, 1998; Boyd *et al.* 2010). Scholars have traditionally focused on the influence of a company's overall reputation or image on recruitment outcomes (Gatewood *et al.*, 1993; Rynes, 1991). Research has recently considered the specific effects of three organizational brand types: product, employment and CSR brands, based upon signaling theory that focuses on the information asymmetry between job seekers and employers (Connelly *et al.*, 2011). Signaling theory holds that because job seekers often have limited knowledge about an organization as a potential employer, they will attend to all available information related to the organization and interpret such information as signals or cues about the organizational attributes, in an effort to ascertain what it would be like to work at the organization (Celani and Singh, 2011; Stockman *et al.*, 2020; Uggerslev *et al.*, 2012).

Drawing upon signaling theory, research has first considered the *employment brand*. Defined as “names, terms, signs, symbols, or designs or a combination of them intended to identify the employment offering of one employer and to differentiate it from the offerings of competing employers” (Gardner *et al.*, 2011, p. 261), employment brands serve as information substitutes for job seekers. Seekers are eager to find as much information as possible about prospective employers, regarding characteristics that cannot be directly observed such as work climate and career development (Gardner *et al.*, 2011). A positive employment brand signals a positive work experience at the organization, and thus has been argued to positively relate to organizational attractiveness (Ghielen *et al.*, 2021; Martin *et al.*, 2011; Stockman *et al.*, 2020; Wilden *et al.*, 2010).

Other research has considered the effects of the *product brand*, which describes “a seller's promise to consistently deliver a specific set of features, benefits and services to the buyers” (Kotler, 1997, p. 443). Also based on signaling theory, product brands are expected to make an organization more attractive among job seekers (Tsai and Yang, 2010) because seekers might interpret it as resulting from the organization's ability to attract and retain talent, indirectly signaling the good attributes of the organization as an employer, such as providing internal opportunities and skill development (DelVecchio *et al.*, 2007; Kim *et al.*, 2011). In other words, product brands can enhance organizational attractiveness by translating to positive perceptions of the organization's employment brand (Barber, 1998; Cable and Turban, 2001). Besides, product awareness boosted by product brands may increase job seekers' familiarity with the organization, spark their interest in the organization as an employer and potentially reduce perceived information costs and risks

associated with joining the organization (Banerjee *et al.*, 2020; Highhouse *et al.*, 2009; Wilden *et al.*, 2010).

While more conceptually nascent than product or employment brands, the *CSR brand* has also been found to increase employer attractiveness (Carlini *et al.*, 2019; Jakob *et al.*, 2022; Jones *et al.*, 2014; Wang and Chen, 2022). Denoting an organization's socially responsible values and morals, CSR brands indicate an organization's overall concern for treatment of others, and how that will be extended to its employees. Job seekers accordingly may expect favorable treatment from the organization. Moreover, a strong CSR brand signals that an organization is prestigious and highly thought of by the public; thus, job seekers likely anticipate a sense of pride from their association with the organization. Given there is no well-accepted consensus on its definition (De Stefano *et al.*, 2018), in this study, we focus on the social and nonsocial stakeholders of an organization (Turker, 2009), and define the CSR brand as comprising "activities, decisions, or policies, that organizations engage in to effect positive social change and environmental sustainability" (Rupp *et al.*, 2006, p. 537).

Despite these advances, little work has considered how employment, product and CSR brands might simultaneously affect organizational attractiveness or job seeker decision-making. We therefore begin by proposing the following three hypotheses, based on our expectation that each of the three brands will be independently linked with organizational attractiveness (i.e. while controlling for the other two brand types):

H1a. Product brand positively relates to organizational attractiveness.

H1b. Employment brand positively relates to organizational attractiveness.

H1c. CSR brand positively relates to organizational attractiveness.

Although we expect the three brand types to simultaneously influence organizational attractiveness, we also propose there will be systematic variability in how strongly job seekers are affected by each. As a brand helps consumers distinguish one organization's goods and services from competitors' (Keller, 1993), product, employment and CSR brands each concern the specific goods and services an organization offers to a focal group of "consumers." Product brand principally matters to the consumers who buy and use the organization's products. Employment brand primarily targets current and potential employees, and the "goods and services" an organization offer is how it treats its employees to exchange their knowledge, skills and abilities for work (Gardner *et al.*, 2011). CSR brand essentially focuses on the general society, evidenced in an organization's community involvement, pro-environmental practices and compliance with laws and governmental rules (Jones *et al.*, 2014; Farooq *et al.*, 2014).

When choosing an organization as an employer, job seekers are trading the self for employment offerings. Knowledge of employee treatment is highly crucial in deciding which organization to join, especially considering the importance of work in human life. Unfortunately, employment-related information is not always sufficiently available, reliable or detailed (Turban, 2001). Representing employment offerings that differentiate one organization from the rest, employment brands proffer job seekers the most relevant information regarding how they will be treated (Gardner *et al.*, 2011), relative to CSR and product brands. We thus expect that the employment brand matters most in shaping organizational attractiveness among job seekers. Relatedly, Farooq *et al.*'s (2014) study compared firms' actions regarding employees' well-being, products and social responsibility, and found that the actions ensuring the well-being and the support of the employees were the strongest predictor of employees' organizational trust and identification. Hence, we propose:

H2. Among the three brand types, employment brand will have the greatest influence on organizational attractiveness.

So far, we have based our hypotheses on the assumption that job seekers process brand information in a linear, additive manner. However, when presented with multiple cues, people do not limit overall evaluations by simply adding component cues, but tend to use configural cue processing (Brehmer, 1969; Zhang and Gowan, 2012). That is, their interpretation of one piece of information is contingent upon other available information. Indeed, prior research has demonstrated configural cue utilization in decision-making and attitude formation. For instance, Hitt and Barr (1989) found that the two-, three-, four- and five-way interactions among job seekers' age, race, education, work experience and the position applied for explained a significant amount of variance in managers' favorability of a job seeker, beyond the main effect of each factor. Similarly, Kristof-Brown *et al.* (2002) found that the interaction of the three types of person-environment fit (person-organization fit, person-job fit and person-group fit) predicted work environment satisfaction beyond any dimension alone, or beyond combinations of any two dimensions. We thus expect multiplicative interactions among the three brand types. In particular, we expect various combinations of the three brands to exert a stronger effect on organizational attractiveness than a simple, additive linear model, suggesting an intensification effect when synergy exists among different brands. We thus propose:

H3. Job seekers will use interactive configural cue processing when combining information on product, employment and CSR brands to evaluate organizational attractiveness.

Moderating effect of national context

The person-environment fit theory suggests that value congruence predicts job seekers' fit perceptions, which in turn shapes attraction (Cable and Parsons, 2001; Kristof-Brown *et al.*, 2005). As established in the cross-national literature, despite globalization progress, crucial socioeconomic differences remain (Allen and Vardaman, 2017). Of great importance are the cultural values people from different countries hold. Different cultural values, or broad tendencies "to prefer certain states of affairs over others" (Hofstede, 2001, p. 5), could lead to different job seeker reactions to organizational characteristics (Baum and Kabst, 2013). In the recruitment process, scholars have argued that cultural values shape job seekers' reactions by affecting the information they attend to, how they interpret the information, and accordingly how they react to the information (Ma and Allen, 2009). Resultantly, they may affect job seekers' person-environment fit perceptions, and thus their attraction to the organization and job pursuit intentions (Dineen, and Noe, 2009; Van Hove and Turban, 2015). Echoing this reasoning, prior research has shown that applicants with different cultural backgrounds react differently to selection techniques (Phillips and Gully, 2002), recruitment advertising (Han and Ling, 2016) and recruitment media (e.g. electronic recruiting, Harrison and Stone, 2018).

As one of the initial efforts to understand the impact of national context on organizational attractiveness as determined by organizational brands, the current study focuses on two countries with considerable differences on various cultural and economic dimensions: the USA and China (Han and Ling, 2016; Spector *et al.*, 2001). One of these crucial distinctions is on the cultural dimension of individualism versus collectivism (Harrison and Stone, 2018; Triandis, 2001). Individualism versus collectivism concerns how closely an individual is associated with their organization (Hofstede, 2001). Individualism represents an emphasis on personal interests

and rights, and individual self-worth. It prioritizes personal over organizational goals, and stresses concerns for oneself and one's immediate family. Collectivism, in contrast, emphasizes a relationship with the organization by which an employee values organizational goals and interests over their own. With priority given to the organization, highly collectivistic employees are willing to sacrifice personal initiatives for organizational benefits (Becton and Field, 2009; Liu *et al.*, 2021; Triandis, 2001).

Residing in a culture dominantly characterized by collectivism (Han and Ling, 2016; Taras *et al.*, 2010), Chinese job seekers have strong collectivistic values and tend to value organizational interests over their own. Indeed, research has shown that Chinese individuals focus more on collective duties and less on individual rights when describing their self-concepts than Americans (Hong *et al.*, 2001; Triandis, 1989). Because organizations with good product brands gain competitive advantage, increased returns and better buffering of threatening macroeconomic forces (Kroll *et al.*, 1999), Chinese job seekers will place greater importance on organizations' product brands than US job seekers, as this more directly pertains to organizational goals. In some cases, the pride of working for an organization that produces world-class products can even turn employees' undesirable work experiences into a valued sense of contributing to the greater good, making employees feel proud to work for such an organization (e.g. www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2010-09/01/content_11241465.htm, "Learning from wolves to fight lions").

By comparison, because individualism is a dominant US cultural value (Taras *et al.*, 2010), US job seekers tend to prioritize their personal work experiences and interests (Hofstede, 2001). This value is strengthened by a more general focus on life quality in US society. For example, US job seekers are less willing to sacrifice their personal life to work overtime, whereas Chinese culture legitimizes and even encourages taking on extra work responsibilities (Yang *et al.*, 2000). Hence, we expect one's personal experience in the workplace might matter relatively more to US job seekers; thus, they are more attracted to organizations well known for good employment practices. In sum, although we expect that product brand exerts a stronger influence on organizational attractiveness among Chinese compared with US job seekers, the effect of employment brand on organizational attractiveness will be greater among US than Chinese job seekers:

- H4a.* The relationship between product brand and organizational attractiveness will be stronger among Chinese relative to US job seekers.
- H4b.* The relationship between employment brand and organizational attractiveness will be stronger among US relative to Chinese job seekers.

Besides cultural value differences, China and the USA have disparate expectations for and implementation of corporate CSR. Unlike the USA's relatively longer CSR history, China is a latecomer in CSR implementation, despite rapidly growing attention by the government, companies and individuals (Chu *et al.*, 2020; Marquis and Qian, 2014). There is still a lack of formal structure (e.g. regulations and laws) regarding corporate CSR practices in China (Gao, 2011; Wei *et al.*, 2018). Many Chinese companies do not have comprehensive CSR strategies (Ge and Zhao, 2017; Wang and Chaudhri, 2009); organizational CSR practices are often responses to CSR pressures from the government (Ge and Zhao, 2017; Moon *et al.*, 2010). As such, Chinese job seekers might perceive the CSR brand as less crucial in their job search. For instance, research shows that Chinese employees from diverse industries view CSR as a charitable activity rather than an indispensable element of organizational sustainable growth (Wang and Chaudhri, 2009). Comparatively, CSR is more commonly expected among US employees. Indeed, Lee *et al.* (2018) compared Chinese and US

employees and found that US employees perceived higher necessity and moral responsibility related to corporate sustainability. We thus expect that the CSR brand will have a greater influence on organizational attractiveness among US relative to Chinese job seekers. We hence propose:

H4c. The relationship between CSR brand and organizational attractiveness will be stronger among US relative to Chinese job seekers.

Method

Participants and procedure

One hundred master of business administration (MBA) students enrolled in a core course and in two sections of an elective course in a large Midwest US university, and 100 MBA students enrolled in a core course in a large university in southwestern China, were invited to participate in this scenario-based study. Fifty-five US students and 85 Chinese students completed the survey. Seven US responses and 2 Chinese responses were unusable because participants did not rate the scenarios or rated them identically, resulting in 48 US responses and 83 Chinese responses. To avoid inaccurate estimations due to sample size inequality (Herberich *et al.*, 2010), we randomly chose 48 Chinese responses for inclusion in the analyses, resulting in a final sample size of 96 participants.

Participants included 54.17% women, with a mean age of 29.14. Their average work experience was 6.32 years. About 20% had already started their job search, and the rest indicated they would, on average, commence their job search sometime in the following eight months. We thus believe this is an appropriate sample to test our hypotheses.

We used a policy-capturing design comprising eight ($2 \times 2 \times 2$) scenarios to investigate our hypotheses. Policy-capturing is an approach for studying decision-making where researchers attempt to uncover which pieces of information are most influential in determining a decision (Aiman-Smith *et al.*, 2001). Research domains including employee reactions to HR policies (Garg *et al.*, 2021), job choice (Judge and Bretz, 1992), recruiters' selection decisions (Moy, 2006) and recruitment (Dineen *et al.*, 2004) have widely used this methodology. We chose it for this study because it allowed us to indirectly assess participant information-processing strategies while allowing sufficient experimental control that enables causal inferences about effects of hypothesized factors on our dependent variable (Cable and Judge, 1994).

The English policy-capturing survey was created first. It was translated to Chinese by two bilingual scholars following standard back translation procedures (Brislin, 1980) for Chinese participants. The survey required approximately 5 min to complete. Participants were asked to read the eight scenarios and rate the attractiveness of the organization described in each scenario. US participants received a \$2 payment and Chinese participants received 10 RMB (about \$1.6) for completing the survey.

Scenario descriptions. Scenarios manipulated levels of three variables: product brand, employment brand and CSR brand. Each variable had a positive and a lesser-known level (see the section Manipulated Factors and Example Scenarios for detailed descriptions for each scenario). Completely crossing all possible combinations of brands and their levels in a fully randomized order yielded eight scenarios. To ensure that order effects were not confounded with attractiveness, we randomized the order of scenario presentation and cues within each scenario for each participant. Factors, their respective levels and a sample scenario are presented in the following section:

(1) Product brand

- [Positive] This company's products are well known and loved by consumers for their high quality and trendiness. When you talk about these products, people automatically recognize the brands.
- [Lesser-known] This company's products are not very well known. When you talk about these products, people do not generally recognize them.

(2) Employment brand

- [Positive] This company is well-recognized as an outstanding place to work. When you talk about potentially working for the company people are excited about the likely experience you would have as an employee there.
- [Lesser-known] There is a general lack of good information about what it would be like to work at this company.

(3) CSR brand

- [Positive] This company is well-recognized as having an outstanding record of social responsibility. For example, it often puts social concerns ahead of immediate interests of the company and what is required by law.
- [Lesser-known] There is a general lack of good information about this company's level of social responsibility. For example, the degree to which it puts social concerns ahead of immediate interests of the company and what is required by law is unknown.

Example scenario

This company is well-recognized as an outstanding place to work. When you talk about potentially working for the company, people are excited about the likely experience you would have as an employee there [employment brand]. Also, this company's products are well known and loved by consumers for their high quality and trendiness. When you talk about these products, people automatically recognize the brands [product brand]. However, there is a general lack of good information about this company's level of social responsibility. For example, the degree to which it puts social concerns ahead of immediate interests of the company and what is required by law is unknown [CSR brand].

Organizational attractiveness. We followed prior policy-capturing studies (Jensen and Raver, 2021; Spence and Keeping, 2010) and used a single item to measure organizational attractiveness after each of the eight scenarios with a Likert-scale item adapted from Highhouse *et al.* (2003): "This company would be attractive to me as a place for employment" (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree).

Controls. We controlled for relevant demographic characteristics. Age was measured in years. Work experience was measured in months. Gender and job search stage were measured as dummy variables (0 = female; 0 = not currently in job search) [1].

Results

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and correlations for the study variables. Multilevel modeling was conducted using Mplus 7.4 (Muthén and Muthén, 2012) to test hypotheses, as it examines both within- and between-individual effects.

Within-subjects analyses

H1a–H1c predicted that product brand, employment brand and CSR brand positively relate to organizational attractiveness. Table 2 presents the multilevel modeling results. Product

Table 1.
Means, standard
deviations and
correlations among
study variables^a

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
<i>Level 2 (N = 96)</i>										
1. Gender ^b	0.46	0.50								
2. Work experience	6.32	6.12	-0.09*							
3. Job search ^b	0.20	0.40	0.07	0.07						
4. Age	29.14	4.99	-0.05**	0.76**	-0.03					
5. US participants ^b	0.50	0.50	0.17**	-0.20**	0.44**	-0.24**				
<i>Level 1 (N = 768)</i>										
6. Product brand ^c	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00			
7. Employment brand ^c	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00		
8. CSR brand ^c	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	
9. Organizational attractiveness	4.59	1.75	-0.01	-0.02	-0.00	-0.00	-0.04	0.35**	0.48**	0.30**

Notes: ^aBecause the study used a completely crossed design to assess the effects of brand types on organizational attractiveness, correlations among brand types are zero by definition. ^bGender (1 = male), Job search (1 = currently in job search), US participants (1 = US participants) were dummy coded. ^cEffects coded variables: product brand (positive = 1), employment brand (positive = 1), CSR brand (positive = 1). ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Variables	Coefficient	Model 1		Model 2	
		SE	Pratt's index	Coefficient	SE
Intercept	2.47***	0.42		2.01	0.41
Gender	-0.05***	0.13		-0.05	0.13
Work experience	-0.01***	0.01		-0.01	0.01
Job search	0.00***	0.17		0.00	0.17
Age	0.01***	0.02		0.01	0.02
Product brand	1.21***	0.11	0.27	2.15***	0.17
Employment brand	1.66***	0.12	0.50	2.34***	0.17
CSR brand	1.04***	0.08	0.20	1.54***	0.16
Employment × Product				-1.40***	0.19
Product × CSR				-1.05***	0.21
Employment × CSR				-0.52***	0.21
Employment × Product × CSR				1.12***	0.27
R^2	0.47***			0.50***	
AIC	2586.78			2552.38	

Table 2.
Effects of brand
types on
organizational
attractiveness

Notes: $N = 768$. Gender (1= male), Job search (1= currently in job search) were dummy coded. Product brand (positive = 1); employment brand (positive = 1); CSR brand (positive = 1). *** $p < 0.001$

brand ($b = 1.21$, $se = 0.11$, $p < 0.001$), employment brand ($b = 1.66$, $se = 0.12$, $p < 0.001$) and CSR brand ($b = 1.04$, $se = 0.08$, $p < 0.001$) were all significantly and positively related to organizational attractiveness. This implies that each brand type independently relates to attractiveness (i.e. while controlling for the others). *H1a–H1c* were thus supported.

H2 proposed that job seekers exhibit higher levels of attractiveness to organizations with positive employment brands than product or CSR brands. To examine the relative weights of these three brand types, we followed Liu *et al.* (2014) and computed the Pratt Indices for each brand type. The Pratt index orthogonally partitions the R^2 , so it can provide a criterion of how much variance was explained by each predictor in the outcome variable (Liu *et al.*, 2014). As shown in Table 2, employment brand had the largest Pratt Index (0.50), which accounted for 50% of the explained variance. It was the most important brand in predicting organizational attractiveness. The next-most important was product brand, accounting for 27% of the explained variance. CSR brand accounted for 20% of the explained variance, making it the least important brand among the three. Therefore, *H2* was supported.

H3 predicted that job seekers will use interactive configural cue processing when combining information on product, employment and CSR brands to evaluate organizational attractiveness. Put differently, information on these three brands will interact multiplicatively to affect attractiveness. To test this, we included the three two-way interaction terms and the three-way interaction term in the model. As shown in Table 2, the two-way interaction between employment and product brands ($b = -1.40$, $se = 0.19$, $p < 0.001$), product and CSR brands ($b = -1.05$, $se = 0.21$, $p < 0.001$) and employment and CSR brands ($b = -0.52$, $se = 0.21$, $p < 0.05$) were significant. The three-way interaction term was significantly positive ($b = 1.12$, $se = 0.27$, $p < 0.001$). Figure 1 presents the three-way interaction. It shows that a combination of three positive brands produces the highest organizational attractiveness, compared with any other combination, while the combination of three lesser-known brands is least attractive, indicating configural cue processing. Simple slope tests showed that the positive relationship between product brand and the organizational attractiveness was significant for all four combinations of employment and CSR brands (high employment and high CSR: $slope = 0.82$, $t = 5.56$, $p < .001$; high

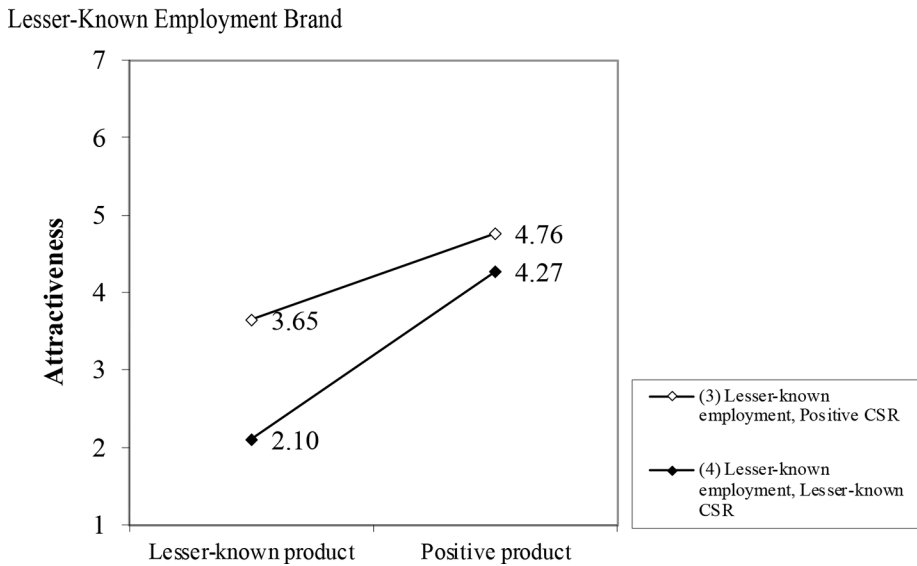
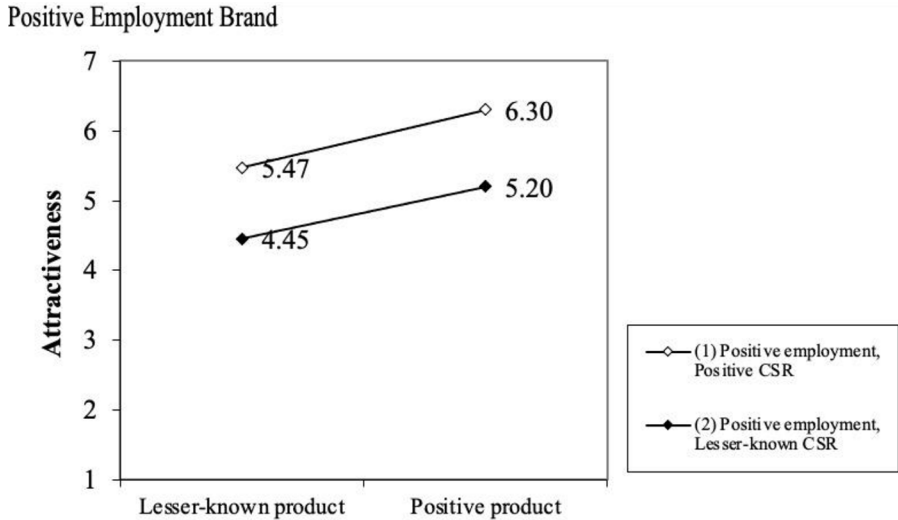


Figure 1. Three-way interaction among brand types in predicting organizational attractiveness

employment and low CSR: $slope = 0.75, t = 4.75, p < 0.001$; low employment and high CSR: $slope = 1.10, t = 6.75, p < 0.001$; low employment and low CSR: $slope = 2.15, t = 12.97, p < 0.001$). The relationship was strongest when both employment and CSR brands were low, but weakest when employment brand was high regardless of CSR brand ($difference = -0.07, p = 0.67$). Taken together, $H3$ was supported.

Between-subjects analyses

$H4a-H4c$ proposed that the relationships between brands and organizational attractiveness are conditioned by whether they occur among US or Chinese job seekers. To test this

moderating effect, the intercepts and the level 1 slope coefficients for product, employment and CSR brands were regressed on the dummy code for sample source (i.e. US or Chinese job seeker), which was a level 2 factor. Table 3 shows that *H4a* was not supported; being a US job seeker did not significantly relate to variance in the within-subject slope between product brand and attractiveness ($\gamma_{11} = -0.17, se = 0.21, n.s.$). Consistent with our expectation, however, being a US job seeker significantly and positively related to variance in employment brand slope ($\gamma_{21} = 0.73, se = 0.23, p < 0.001$). Thus, *H4b* was supported, implying that the positive impact of employment brand on attractiveness was significantly stronger among US job seekers. *H4c* predicted a stronger relationship between CSR brand and attractiveness among US relative to Chinese job seekers. This received marginal support ($\gamma_{31} = 0.30, se = 0.16, p < 0.10$) [2].

Supplementary analysis: differences in brand importance between US and Chinese job seekers

To further illustrate the moderating effect of national context on the relationships between brand types and organizational attractiveness, we examined, in a supplementary fashion, whether there are differences between US and Chinese job seekers regarding the importance attached to each brand type. We calculated the Pratt indices for each brand type separately in the US and Chinese samples. Results are presented in Table 4. For US job seekers, employment brand accounted for 58% of the explained variance, serving as the strongest predictor of attractiveness. Product brand and CSR brand each accounted for 18% and 20% of the explained variance. Chinese job seekers, comparatively, placed the same weight on product and employment brands (Pratt Index = 0.39 for both brands). CSR brand only accounted for 19% of the explained variance in organizational attractiveness, making it the least important brand (Pratt Index = 0.19). Hence, it does appear that US and Chinese job seekers weigh brand types differently.

We also explored whether there were differences in the interactive configural cue processing between Chinese and US participants. Results based on both US and Chinese data showed similar patterns of interactive effects as the findings were consistent with those of which when both US and Chinese data were used. However, the interaction term of

Variables	Coefficient	Organizational attractiveness	
		SE	t
<i>Intercept (β_{0j})</i>			
Intercept (γ_{00})	2.92***	0.16	18.07
US participants (γ_{01})	-0.56***	0.13	-3.92
<i>Product brand Cue (β_{1j})</i>			
Intercept (γ_{10})	1.30***	0.18	7.23
US participants (γ_{11})	-0.17	0.21	-0.81
<i>Employment brand Cue (β_{2j})</i>			
Intercept (γ_{20})	1.30***	0.16	8.13
US participants (γ_{21})	0.73***	0.23	3.21
<i>CSR brand Cue (β_{3j})</i>			
Intercept (γ_{30})	0.89***	0.12	7.53
US participants (γ_{31})	0.30 [†]	0.16	1.82

Notes: US participants (1 = US participants) were dummy coded. Product brand (positive = 1); employment brand (positive = 1); CSR brand (positive = 1). [†] $p < 0.10$

Table 3.
The moderating
effect of cultural
background

Table 4.
Relative importance
of brand types on
organizational
attractiveness in the
USA and China

Variables	Model (USA)			Model (China)		
	Coef.	SE	Pratt's index	Coef.	SE	Pratt's index
Intercept	1.75***	0.52		3.84***	1.82	
Gender	0.01***	0.19		0.02**	0.21	
Work experience	-0.01***	0.01		-0.02***	0.08	
Job search	0.10***	0.21		-0.42***	0.17	
Age	0.02***	0.02		-0.03***	0.08	
Product brand	1.13***	0.12	0.18	1.48***	0.18	0.39
Employment brand	2.03***	0.16	0.58	1.35***	0.16	0.39
CSR brand	1.19***	0.11	0.20	0.87***	0.12	0.19
R ²	0.59***			0.38***		
AIC	1229.25			1341.61		

Notes: N(USA) = N(China) = 384. Gender (1= male), job search (1= currently in job search) Product brand (positive =1); employment brand (positive =1); CSR brand (positive =1). *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$

product×CSR brands was only significant for Chinese data (Chinese: $b = -1.61, p < 0.001$; US: $b = -0.49, p = 0.076$), and the interaction term of employment×CSR was not significant for either US ($b = -0.47, p = 0.097$) or Chinese data ($b = -0.57, p = 0.071$). However, these nonsignificant findings might be because of the reduced sample size.

Discussion

Primary conclusions

This study investigated how organizations' product, employment and CSR brands influence organizational attractiveness. In general, the results showed some support for our predictions. First, the three brand types all positively related to organizational attractiveness when effects of the other two brands were controlled. When multiple pieces of information on brands are present, job seekers engage in configural cue processing and take all information into consideration. The combination of three positive brands yields the highest attractiveness, followed by the combination of two positive brands, and the lowest attractiveness occurs when all three brands are lesser-known. Therefore, each brand not only works independently but also works with other brands in determining job seekers' attraction. We also find that, overall, participants place more weight on the employment brand relative to CSR and product brands in relation to organizational attractiveness. Moreover, national context conditions the relationship between employment brand and organizational attractiveness. The positive effect of employment brand on attractiveness is more prominent among US than Chinese job seekers. Further supporting this, our findings show that US job seekers consider employment brand as the most important factor in assessing organizational attractiveness, whereas employment and product brands weigh equally for Chinese job seekers.

Theoretical implications

Corroborating conclusions of prior studies (Jones *et al.*, 2014; Wilden *et al.*, 2010; Lievens, 2007), our study adds new evidence to the conclusion that positive organizational brands – in the current context product, employment and CSR – increase perceived organizational attractiveness among job seekers. Job seekers are always faced with information on multiple brands of an organization (Baum and Überschaer, 2018). By showing that product,

employment and CSR brands each uniquely explain variance in organizational attractiveness when considered simultaneously by job seekers, our study indicates that job seekers are able to distinguish among different brands an organization possesses.

Our design also enabled us to examine the way job seekers process brand information. The results indicate that rather than processing information in an additive manner, job seekers engage in more complicated interactive configural cue processing and assess available information multiplicatively. Our results for the two- and three-way interactions provide insight on the complex question on how brands mingle with each other in affecting job seekers' reactions (Backhaus, 2016). Specifically, the two-way interaction results suggest that a positive CSR or employment brand weakens the effect of a product brand on attractiveness. Similarly, the influence of employment brand on organizational attractiveness is reduced if a company enjoys a positive product brand or CSR brand. The results of the three-way interaction also indicate that product brand matters most only without the presence of positive CSR nor employment brands. These results suggest a substitution effect of different brand types. Yet, there might be differences in brands regarding the extent of the weakening effect. For example, compared with product brand, the positive effect of a strong employment brand on job seekers does not suffer that much given a lesser-known CSR brand, as the coefficient of the CSR×employment brand interaction term is much smaller. The significant three-way interaction indicates that the impact of brands on attractiveness is most positive when the all three types of brands are positive. These findings therefore should encourage scholars to carefully and jointly consider all relevant brand types in recruitment research.

Although it appears that product, employment and CSR brands independently shape organizational attractiveness, theory and research suggest that the magnitude and relevance of each brand's impact may vary (Gardner *et al.*, 2011). Our findings lend empirical support to this by demonstrating that job seekers allocate more weight to the employment brand. Our results thus begin to provide a more detailed and complete picture of how organizational branding efforts, comprising product branding, employment branding and CSR branding influence organizational attractiveness.

Scholars generally acknowledge the necessity of studying recruitment in cross-national contexts. Yet, Anglo-Saxon recruitment research has dominated (Allen and Vardaman, 2017; Lievens and Slaughte, 2016), despite the fact that a fast-growing number of companies recruit globally to meet the increasing demand for international talent. The recruitment literature continues to lag in providing insights on how organizational brands exert effects given diverse cultural values and economic situations. By recruiting US and Chinese samples and comparing their reactions to organizational brands, our study finds that national context conditions the influence of employment brand on organizational attractiveness, such that employment brand has a greater positive impact among US than Chinese job seekers in choosing employers. The marginally significant moderating effect of national context on the association between CSR brand and attractiveness also indicates that a renowned CSR brand could potentially more saliently enhance attractiveness among US than Chinese job seekers. Such findings enrich a relatively limited understanding of the influence of national context on prospective employees' reactions to information about organizational brands.

Practical implications

As organizational brands matter for recruitment outcomes, organizational brand management serves as an essential element in the "war for talent." Our study shows not only that each brand uniquely influences organizational attractiveness, but also that brands

interact in determining job seeker reactions. Thus, organizations should avoid focusing on one particular brand, but rather take a holistic view and pay sufficient attention to product, employment and CSR brands. Yet, because job seekers value these three brands differently, organizations may want to strategically plan resource investment in each brand. For example, as our findings show that job seekers put less importance on CSR brand, organizations could benefit by putting more effort in building a positive employer image or product reputation, especially for those with a limited budget on brand building.

To successfully attract highly qualified employees beyond the boundaries of a particular country, organizations may also need to adapt their brand management strategies to the specific national context. As shown in our results, employment brand has a stronger effect on organizational attractiveness among US compared with Chinese job seekers. Thus, organizations may need to customize brand management strategies to talent in these two job markets. For example, they might focus more on the employment brand and promote exceptional work experiences during the recruitment process in the US market. To impress talented prospects in China who value product and employment brands equally, organizations may need to form and sustain positive and coordinated images for both brands via advertising, social media presence and well-executed recruitment processes.

Limitations

As with all studies, our study has several limitations. First, although the use of policy capturing allows us to examine multiple types of brands job seekers might simultaneously perceive, and their relative importance, our manipulations in this design did not reflect all of the information applicants might obtain about organizations. Thus, generalizability needs to be established in field settings. This is especially critical given that we are trying to capture aspects of organizations' brands, which are more esoteric and difficult to cull down to written scenarios.

Second, to assess the influence of national context, we recruited Chinese and US participants. Although this allows us to deduce in general how national context changes the influence of organizational brands on job seeker reactions, it falls short of detailing how specific cultural values and economic factors exert effects. Still, we believe that using Chinese and US samples is relevant for understanding the role of national context in recruitment, because these countries differ markedly both culturally and economically. Besides, when we recruited participants in USA, we did not limit to American students, so there could be students from China studying in USA but as US participants in this study. In this case, our findings would be more conservative, such that any differences between job seekers from these two countries could be even more evident in reality than the results suggest. Third, following prior studies ([Jensen and Raver, 2021](#); [Spence and Keeping, 2010](#)), we measured organizational attractiveness using a single item. This may call into question its reliability, but we believe our shorter overall survey format helped ensure participant attention in completing the surveys.

Future directions

We believe our work provides a starting point for simultaneously investigating the effects of multiple brand types in recruitment and cross-cultural contexts, with several pertinent directions for future research in addition to those identified above. For example, we only assessed two levels of three brand types. That is, organizations represented in our scenarios possessed, for each brand, a very positive or lesser-known brand. This may be similar to real situations a job seeker faces, but companies may also have negative brands. Prior studies have illustrated that job seekers interpret positive and negative information fundamentally

differently, such that negative information has a greater substantive impact on job seekers' attraction to organization, with this effect persisting over time (Kanar *et al.*, 2010). Given the scenario-based nature of our study, we believed that demand characteristics would be too strong had we presented negative brand information (e.g. "This company is well-recognized as having a poor record of social responsibility"). However, this is a fruitful direction from which to approach future field-based work in this area. For example, this research might examine how much positive brand information is required to compensate for a negative branding episode, such as in the Target Corporation example we described at the outset.

Research also suggests that the source by which job seekers receive employment information is one of the key factors that might influence their initial attraction to the organization (Barber, 1998; Rynes and Cable, 2003). Marketing research suggests that individuals generally attach different meanings to information from organizational versus other sources, and sometimes doubt organizational claims (Ford *et al.*, 1990). In the recruitment literature, some studies have examined the effects of word-of-mouth communication on applicant attraction and explicitly incorporated negative information furnished by external sources, rather than the organization, as part of the design (Dineen *et al.*, 2019). These studies have found that information sources impacted decision-making and attitude formation.

Thus, future research should include negative information related to these three brand types, as well as differing sources. Here, it is possible that job seekers regard information from insiders or third parties as more trustworthy than messages released by the organization itself because it is normative for companies to deliver positive information to attract talent. Research has found that receiving positive employment information through word-of-mouth early in the recruitment process positively relates to perceptual and behavioral outcomes (Van Hove and Lievens, 2009). It will be interesting to compare the relative importance of word-of-mouth, third party and organization-dependent brand information for job seekers: whether these brand types are initiated and sustained through organizational efforts or a third party, or initiated and promulgated via word of mouth, and for which types of brand information these effects materialize – whether product, employment or CSR brand information. Finally, we anticipate additional intriguing cross-national effects, such as potential preferences for word-of-mouth versus organization-sponsored branding efforts across different cultural groups. We encourage continued work in the branding space to elucidate these and other potential antecedents, moderators and outcomes.

Notes

1. We tested whether there were significant differences regarding gender, age, work experience and job search stage between Chinese and US participants. Results showed that participants differed in age ($t = -8.11, p < 0.001$), work experience ($t = -6.84, p < 0.001$) and job search stage ($\chi^2(1) = 18.96, p < 0.000$), but not in gender ($\chi^2(1) = 2.67, p = 0.101$). We thus tested the model with all four control variables and the one without gender, and both yielded consistent findings. Here, we report model results with all four control variables included.
2. We also conducted analyses using all data received ($N = 131$). For level 1 analyses, the results led to similar conclusions, except that Chinese participants placed more weight on product brand (Pratt index = 0.44) than employment brand (Pratt index = 0.37). For level 2 analyses, with a larger sample size, results showed that being a US or Chinese participant significantly moderated the relationship between CSR brand and organizational attractiveness ($\gamma_{31} = .29, p < 0.05$), such that the relationship was significantly stronger among US job seekers.

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